

Problem Statement

At a Glance

What Else Is It Called?

- Needs statement
- Statement of need
- Needs assessment
- The problem

When Is It Used?

- Always—your project must be a solution to a problem.
- The absence of something is not a problem.
 - “We do not have a swimming pool so we need a swimming pool” is not a problem statement.

Why Is It Used?

- Your connection to the funder is that you both want to solve the same problem.
- If your project does not clearly provide a potential solution to the problem in which both you and the funder are interested, then funding is not likely.

Key Concepts

- A problem is the reason for a project.
- Well thought-out and backed by statistics.
- Logical and specific.
- Provide comparative data.
- Short pithy sentences—do not ramble.

Describe the Problem

- Any project must start with a problem statement. It is the basis for your project.
- Your connection with the funder is that you both want to solve the same problem.
- The lack of something is not in and of itself a problem.

The Problem Is the Basis for Your Project

- Only if you identify a legitimate problem, can you match a funder and acquire a grant.
- Even the most esoteric project has a problem at its core.
 - Why implement a senior information center? Because seniors need complex information and there are so many resources that can be confusing.
 - Why establish a museum? It solves the problem of preserving history for future generations.

The Problem Is Your Connection with the Funder

- Why do people and organizations give away money?
 - Foundation and corporate giving programs have to submit a set of bylaws that clearly and specifically state why they are in business to give away money.
 - In the case of an individual who establishes a foundation, normally there is a life event or a personal philosophy that drives the problem the individual wants solved.
 - Government programs are designed to solve problems that are real but also those have captured the attention of the public or of a group with a significant or a distinctive presence within a society.
- Your problem is to match a critical interest for the funder in order for your proposal to be considered.

The Lack of Something Is Not a Problem

- The lack of something is not equivalent to the problem. You have to lay the groundwork to match the funder's interests.
 - Example: A swimming pool—Your community has a high crime rate among teenagers. There is nothing for them to do in the community—no gathering place and no fruitful activity. Since you are in a tropical environment, you believe that a community swimming pool with adequate supervision and special programs to attract teenagers will help eliminate the crime problem by providing a place to go after school, rather than wandering the streets in gangs. You have opened a lot of territory to match funders who are interested in youth, in crime reduction, and in health and exercise programs.

Include These Elements in the Problem Statement

Logical Narrative Description of the Problem

- Hone in on your problem. Define it and clarify it before you start to write.
- Do not include problems that are not vital or essential. It may cloud the issue as far as your project is concerned.
 - Example: You want to initiate education and counseling project to work with young women and men to address the high teen pregnancy rate in your community. Do not include that this is why the crime rate is higher in your community or why there are so many accidental deaths in children in your community.
- Lay the groundwork carefully for the project you intend to do.
 - Example: The United States has the highest teenage pregnancy rate of all developed countries. About 1 million teenagers become pregnant each year; 95% of those pregnancies are unintended. Public costs from teenage childbearing total \$120 billion from 1985 – 1990; \$48 billion could have been saved if each birth had been postponed until the mother was at least 20 years old.

Though birth rates for teenagers declined for all races and ethnic groups in the United States in past years, the rates are growing in our community (see following table). They are growing in all social groups and in all ethnic groups.

Teen Pregnancy Rates (Pregnancies per 1,000 Girls)	Our State	Our State Rank	United States	Our Community
15 to 19 years old	-11%	29	-13%	+23%
Girls age 14 or younger	-23%	10	-11%	+13%
15 to 17 year olds	-10%	33	-13%	+25%
18 to 19 year olds	-11%	28	-11%	+30%

*Rank of 1 = lowest rate

In a survey of all youths age 14 to 19, there was a lack of understanding of how decisions made today affect one's life in the future. Moreover, there was a general feeling that someone else would deal with the consequences of their decisions. Following is a chart of the questions and percentages of young people answering each option as well as a chart of the most common comments by those questions.

- The problem statement directly points to the solution we are offering to the problem.

Statistical Backups and Comparisons

- Data is only pertinent and has an impact if it is comparative so that the reader can relate the statistic to something. One data point will not do.
- It is good to compare your community's problem to the problem in the state and the nation.
- Funders unless they are local, are generally not interested in providing a solution to a problem in your community.
- Funders are interested in providing a potential solution to a problem that can be replicated in communities like yours in other parts of the country.

Statement of Impact of Problem

- Few proposal writers explain what will be the natural result, if the problem is not solved.
- Thus, they have a difficult time explaining the positive outcome of their project.
- What is the social, medical, psychological or physical impact if problem is not solved.

Checklist*—Problem Statement

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Describe broad problem – the major symptom of the real problem(s)
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Describe causes of broad problem – the real problem(s)
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	A problem cited for each project component
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Statistics and citations for each assertion
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Statistics placing your situation in perspective with state and nation
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Extensive numerical data in tables
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Local needs assessment, survey results, focus group results
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Historical perspective
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Impact of problem

*Remember that a grant funder's directions (instructions/guidelines) take precedence over any and all other considerations. You must absolutely, positively follow the grant funder's directions exactly, precisely, and painstakingly.

Use tables, charts, or graphs to display large amounts of numerical data. Many numbers contained in text can be difficult to understand, resulting in the reader missing key relationships.

Last Words

- From the viewpoint of the funder, you do not have problems. Your organization or agency does not have problems. Only people in target populations have problems.
- A target population is that group of people whom you intend to impact positively through the activities of your organization.
 - This is why your problem may not be the lack of things, such as computers, or staff, or space, or training. Your target population may languish because you do not offer computer-assisted services or they may need better-trained people assisting them.
- Projects are solutions to problems. Therefore, the goals, objectives, and activities of your project flow naturally from your problem.
- Astute reviewers have a good idea of the activities that should be in a project after reading the problem statement.
 - If you make the point that a change in your target population necessitates additional staff training, then that staff training had better show up in the project.
- Projects begin with and flow from the problem statement.
- When you start describing your project, every aspect should trace its origin back to the problem.
- Use the problem statement to show clearly that the activities in the project are worth the time and the money.

Sunnyvale School District

After School Program

Problem Statement

Sunnyvale School District faces problems similar to many rural school districts across the nation. In summary, the problems are low academic achievement, high dropout rate (low graduation rate), low self-esteem, increasing incidents of violence, increasing use of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs, few chances for organized recreation, and insufficient positive parental involvement in education.

On the state-mandated Academic Achievement Assessment (AAA) in both language arts and mathematics, District Middle School students score in the lowest quartile of state school districts. In language arts, the District's middle school students placed 61st out of 64 districts. In mathematics, the District's middle school students placed 55th.

On the California Achievement Test (CAT), District middle school students performed below both state and national averages. Scores are shown in the following table.

	Language Arts	Mathematics
National Average	112.8	108.5
State Average	98.6	104.2
District Average	93.3	102.1

The dropout rate for our state is among the highest in the nation. Our school district's dropout rate is 21st out of 64 districts, making our dropout rate one of the highest in the country.

Low self-esteem manifests itself, for our purposes, in the belief that things will always be the way they have been, that the student's life will be the same as their parents' lives. Students from homes in which the adults did not graduate from high school tend to be resigned to the same fate. Students who come from homes in which the adults either do not work at all or work at manual or menial labor tend to the same future (Walker and Jones, "Influence of Home Factors on School and Work," *Education USA*, June, 1999).

For incidents of violence, the district's rate is low when compared to large urban areas. When compared against similar rural areas, however, the district's rate of violent incidents is above average (*U.S. Census, 2000*). More troubling is that the rate has been on the increase for five straight years (*County Juvenile Court Summary Report: 2001*).

After almost ten years of declining use of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs (ATOD), the district began to see increases in 1998. The rate of use has now climbed back to rates not seen here since the early nineties (*County Juvenile Court Summary Report: 2001*). The reasons are not understood, but the disruptive results to both academics and behavior are clear.

As is typical for rural areas, the opportunities for organized recreation are limited. The sheriff's office reports that the time frame during which the vast majority of incidents of juvenile (middle school age)

violence and ATOD infractions occur is between 3:00 and 5:30 P.M., the time between school letting out and caretaker adults arriving home from work. The major cause is the lack of supervised after school activities to take the place of no adult supervision at home. An additional problem is the supervision of young children by their only slightly older siblings.

The literature clearly shows the relation between positively involved parents and success of their children in school, both academically and behaviorally. There is also a correlation between the income and education of parents and their involvement. The more educated the parents, the more they are involved in their children's education. The reasons are complex, but for our purposes we can summarize that those parents who themselves failed to do well in school as children tend to avoid contact with school as adults. Walking down school hallways, sitting in school rooms, and talking to teachers brings back a set of learned negative reactions from the time when school was a place of disappointment and failure ("The Influence of Parent's School Experience on Involvement with their Children's Education," Journal of Education Psychology, January, 2002. Milk, Spoon, and Peaches.).

Results from our community focus groups show that the vast majority of parents (for all practical purposes, all parents), regardless of income or education want their children to do well in school. The problem is one of not knowing how to help. The desire is there. The parent focus groups identified four main barriers. (1) Meetings are at school, a place with bad connotations for many. (2) Teachers "talk down to us and don't listen." (3) Meetings are scheduled at the school's convenience. The work schedules of many people are such that they need flexibility. (4) A substantial minority of caretakers lack transportation to and from meetings.

The Senior Citizen Wellness Center

Problem Statement

The elderly population of our city is a much larger percentage of the total population than in the country as a whole.

The median age of the U.S. population is 35.3 years. The median age of our city's population is 49.2 years (U.S. Census, 2000).

Of the overall population of the United States, 12.4% are 65 years and over. Our city's population is 23.8% 65 years and over (U.S. Census, 2000).

The average household size of owner-occupied housing in the United States is 2.7 persons. In our city, the average household size is 1.4 persons (U.S. Census, 2000).

The problems of the elderly are well-documented. Health and wellness head the list. Physical decline inhibits the elderly from moving about easily, making the normal functions of life, such as shopping, difficult or impossible. Mental decline makes the elderly susceptible to mistakes with medication and dealing with the complications of life, such as taxes and paying bills. Lack of mobility also decreases the opportunity for social interaction, which furthers mental decline (*Aging and its Effects on Everyday Living*, AARP, 2000).

The federal government, the state, the city, and private organizations offer a wide variety of services to the elderly, ranging from help with utilities to mental health counseling. In our city, we have identified 24 such programs. This variety causes very real problems for the elderly since each program has its own eligibility requirements, application procedures, paperwork, and follow-up.

A survey undertaken by the Senior Citizen Center found that the average senior has knowledge of only seven programs, with Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, and Meals on Wheels consistently being four of the seven. A further result of the survey was that 75% of the seniors found the experience of applying for the benefits of the average program to be "terrible." There was no real variation among sources, whether federal, state, city, or private. The application experience was uniformly rated as bad to terrible (Senior Citizen Center Survey: What Seniors Think, 2002—see appendix for a copy of the survey questionnaire and compilation of results).

Comments given by survey respondents found application processes to be "made for much younger folks" and "confusing and demeaning." The general consensus was that they had worked hard all their lives and deserved better at this stage of their lives than to be demeaned by "begging" for the means to live.

Inner City Alcohol and Drug Prevention Commission

Alcohol, Tobacco and Other Drugs (ATOD) Prevention Project

Problem Statement

During the late eighties and most of the nineties, alcohol, tobacco, and other drug (ATOD) use declined among all age groups. The past few years, however, have seen an increase in the use of alcohol, of tobacco, and of certain drugs, mostly among school-age children. The problem extends down into the middle school grades, which begin at either 5th or 6th grade. The problem varies from state to state and even from school district to school district (*Demographic Subgroup Trends for Various Licit and Illicit Drugs: 1975-2001*, Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan, 2002).

Experts disagree on the causes of this latest upward trend, but some consensus does exist. A decade of declining ATOD abuse figures caused substance abuse organizations to grow lax about getting the word out, about spreading the message. Programs against substance abuse in the schools have grown old and stale. They have not kept up, and an alarming number of today's children are ignoring the message (John J. Master, "Why Now: What's Causing our Kids to Light Up, Chug Down, and Get High?" *Health Care Digest*, April, 2002).

Additionally, a decade of shrinking numbers caused the intervention and response capacity of many anti-abuse organizations to weaken. As demand declined, these organizations naturally reallocated resources to other issues. In our community, no publicly available ATOD intervention and response resource exists.